

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 293 358

FL 017 334

AUTHOR Carney, William J.
TITLE Commercial French to English Translation: A Holistic Approach.
PUB DATE May 87
NOTE 23p.; In: Languages and Communication for World Business and the Professions. Conference Proceedings; see FL 017 281.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Business Communication; Classroom Techniques; College Students; Course Content; English; *French; Higher Education; Holistic Approach; Instructional Materials; Interpreters; *Languages for Special Purposes; *Language Skills; Second Language Instruction; *Translation

ABSTRACT

It is proposed that the upper-level language curriculum include a course in commercial French-to-English translation as a means of enhancing student expertise and range of understanding in the commercial domain. Translation lends itself to curricular variety, is integrative, is flexible, and is rewarding to students. However, in commercial translation, students must find their way through a difficult "translation middle ground" in which translations are imprecise and clarity is gained only through acquisition of subject-area knowledge. The purpose of the translation course is to help students create a "translation universe," or well-defined set of parameters for specific translation needs. This universe, developed in the translation classroom, must be established in the student's native language and must take into account the student's prior knowledge of business terminology and procedures. Four techniques for creating a translation universe in the classroom are described; these techniques vary according to the level of sophistication of the translations and the student's background. All approaches require appropriate materials, which should be authentic and not lend themselves readily to analysis in the target language. The best material types are fixed-form documents and passages of a highly specialized or stylized nature. (MSE)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED293358

COMMERCIAL FRENCH TO ENGLISH TRANSLATION:
A HOLISTIC APPROACH

by

William J. Carney, M.A.
Gannon University

Presented at the Sixth Annual Conference on Languages
and Communication for World Business and the Professions
sponsored by Eastern Michigan University
Ann Arbor, Michigan, May 7-9, 1987

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

g Voght

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
OERI position or policy.

FL017334

William J. Carney, M.A.
Gannon University

Commercial French to English Translation: A Holistic Approach

In a paper which I presented at the Fourth Annual Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages for Business and the Professions in May, 1985, I defended the inclusion of an upper-level commercial French course in the foreign language curriculum by showing that the traditional skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) can be successfully adapted to the teaching of business French. This paper will focus on what might be called the "fifth skill," that of French to English translation, and offer a rationale for considering it as the basis for another type of upper-level commercial offering. Discussion will then focus on the need for what I call a "translation universe" and cover techniques which teachers can use to create that universe in their classroom. Finally, it will be important to identify specific types of French-language commercial documents which should be targeted for translation and to suggest sources of authentic materials for classroom use.

It is tempting to justify a course in commercial French to English translation on a totally pragmatic basis. Persons possessing such a skill will enhance their job prospects because many American firms do business with the French and with Francophone countries. While the realities of the job market may draw students to commercial translation, they will do very

little to make them competent translators in the short or the long run. A more cogent reason for studying commercial French to English translation springs from the very diversity and complexity of topics in the commercial realm. As I demonstrated in the paper mentioned above, topics like commercial correspondence, advertising, buying, selling and customer-oriented banking and postal operations can be successfully taught using the traditional skills. But the traditional approach engenders its own limitations. Once students have become acquainted with, say, banking operations, they must go on to another topic and yet another, if the traditionally-oriented commercial French course is to be a true survey of the business horizon in France. How then will students develop the depth required in specific areas of concern? How will they come to see the applications (and implications) of what they have learned as they are revealed in specialized French newspaper articles, business reports, technical correspondence and legal contracts which often deal with more profound aspects of the topics covered in the commercial survey course? My answer is that translation activity must be brought to the fore as an effective means of enhancing student expertise and range of understanding in the commercial domain, and I am proposing that, for advanced students who want to plumb the depths of commercial French, the French to English translation offering is an appropriate complement to the traditionally-oriented business French survey course. Indeed, translation activity has many

valuable qualities. It lends itself to variety because a large number of passages can be considered during a given semester; it is integrative because translators must relate passage content to what they have learned about culture and commerce both in France and in the United States; it is flexible because students can work at their own pace and may choose to sequence passages according to their interests; finally, it is rewarding because students increase their understanding of commercial life in France and they do it through their own efforts.

Teaching commercial translation is not without its difficulties, however. I have taught a general-subject translation course on the intermediate level for many years and have found that humanities and social science topics have a certain immediacy because students can relate them by analogy to their own experience and education. This is not to say that all my intermediate students become talented translators, but their ability to identify with the subject matter puts the wind at their back in their efforts to arrive at coherency. Commercial French to English translation, on the other hand, requires students to pass through a sort of "translation middle ground." One could describe this "translation middle ground" as a state of ambiguity caused by a preliminary English translation that lacks cohesion and immediacy. Student translators may encounter this "translation middle ground" for several reasons:

1. Key vocabulary within a given French sentence or phrase may be devoid of meaning (may have no affective value) for

students even in English because the English equivalents they find are idiosyncratic or technical.

2. In an analogous vein, conceptual difficulties may be generated by a series of sentences within a given passage or even by the entire passage. Students must understand the concept involved before they can put the English equivalents they have found into a proper context. The concept in question may be commercial-technical or commercial-cultural, and its multi-faceted nature makes the search for context all the more difficult.

Difficulties encountered within a given sentence are illustrated by the following statement, in which translation accuracy depends on the precise meaning of a single expression: "La grève du zèle organisée par les douaniers a sérieusement affecté nos livraisons." The term une grève du zèle is found in the dictionary, where it is translated as a 'work-to-rule strike.'¹ The students' satisfaction at having found the correct meaning will be short-lived when they realize that the English translation is ambiguous. A prior awareness of the types of strikes normally called by workers is needed in order to bring the term "work-to-rule" into focus. The slowdown strike, in which customs officers reduce their efficiency by enforcing regulations too scrupulously, (that is, "going by the book") is the type of strike which best corresponds to the meaning given by the dictionary. Translation clarity is thus

achieved by reference to a pre-existing inventory of vocabulary in English.²

Imprecise translation also results when students cannot focus on the interior unity of a passage due to their lack of familiarity with its subject matter. In the following letter, translation clarity demands prior knowledge of a technical process:

Nous faisons suite à votre demande de documentation sur le Pli enveloppant "Pli-Post" et la machine "Folist."

Nous vous prions de bien vouloir trouver ci-joint un dossier complet sur ce matériel, ainsi que des spécimens de pli enveloppant avant passage sur imprimante, après ruptage et après façonnage sur la machine Folist.

Ce système permet de traiter les documents sur tous types d'imprimantes et plus particulièrement, sur imprimante au laser, du fait que la colle est déposée au moment du façonnage des documents.³

Unless students are aware of how pre-printed order envelopes are prepared, the English equivalent of such key terms as pli enveloppant (foldable reply envelope), matériel (equipment), ruptage (cutting), façonnage (shaping) and imprimante (printer), while in the dictionary, will be like jewels without a setting, pleasing to the eye but lacking in

impact because they have no predefined relationship to each other.

It is well to note at this point that, while a thorough knowledge of French grammar and structure is essential to translation activity at any level and of any type, it is less a guarantee of success with commercial topics than with others because the vocabulary "guess factor" is often severely diminished or non-existent. My experience with the French to English commercial translation course suggests that even students with a strong background in French grammar and structure fall far short of accuracy when they cannot find their way through the "translation middle ground" which occurs in the ways I have just described. Moreover, in commercial translation as in other types, students have a tendency to proceed inductively (by amassing English equivalents of French vocabulary without regard to their interrelationships) rather than deductively (by fitting the English equivalents into a total picture). Teachers must counter this tendency as part of their effort to guide students to translation clarity.

The problems associated with commercial French to English translation are thus very real and they must be resolved before students can be expected to translate accurately. In my opinion, the purpose of the commercial translation course should be to help students create what I call a "translation universe," that is, a well-defined set of parameters for the passage they are about to render into English. Students must be led to see

each French text as a large but potentially coherent jigsaw puzzle which they are to recreate (in English) through the proper placement of what at first seem to be amorphous parts. Only when students try to visualize the whole at the outset will the pieces lose their fluidity and find their proper spot in the total picture.

There are a number of ways to create a commercial translation universe, but any method selected must have two important characteristics:

1. The universe must be constructed primarily in the student's native language, not in French.
2. Prior student acquaintance with business terminology and business procedures (in French and in English) must be taken into account.

The requirement that the translation universe for each topic under consideration be constructed in English rather than in French may at first seem surprising and somewhat illogical, because translators must obviously begin their work with a French-language text. We must keep in mind, however, that translation from a foreign language, the "fifth language skill," has a very different orientation than the other four. Listening, speaking, reading and writing activities are exercised in an environment which aims at building mastery in the foreign language by systematically distancing students from the influence of their mother tongue. French to English translation, on the other hand, attempts to achieve accuracy and

coherency in the mother tongue itself, and classroom techniques for building foreign language mastery are relatively useless and time consuming when brought to the service of French to English translation. Thus for example, students trying to speak and write in French have a real need for pertinent vocabulary because they will to some degree be creating their own context for its use. On the other hand, lists of French vocabulary concerning mortgage credit will not make a translation activity much easier, because context is created by the French passage itself, not by a separate vocabulary list per se, nor by those doing the translating.

Methods of creating a translation universe for a particular topic should also be keyed to the students' prior exposure to commerce. Those who have already taken an economics course will not have extraordinary difficulty conceptualizing the world of supply and demand, and anyone who has studied the French postal banking system will not be completely at sea when translating an article on the role of banking in the economy.

I propose four techniques for creating a translation universe in the classroom. Instructors will want to choose from among them those which best suit their students' background in commerce. As a first technique, the instructor gives a brief English synopsis of the passage. He or she might say, for example, that the passage concerns mortgage credit as it relates to the business sector rather than to the private sector. Students well-acquainted with this general topic will then be

cued to review what they have learned in other courses and use it as a guide while translating the passage.

The second technique is a variation of the first. The instructor may ask each student to read the passage at home and to write a brief English summary of its content before beginning systematic translation of the text. The instructor may wish to evaluate these synopses for accuracy privately or to use them as part of a class discussion in which students themselves arrive at a mutually acceptable résumé. This summary then serves as a deductive guide because it gives the grandes lignes of the passage. Students tackle the complete translation individually on their own time and are forced to reject renderings which are clearly at odds with the summary statement they have agreed upon.

Very sophisticated passages call for a third technique. Students with some commercial background could engage in a sort of reverse explication de texte according to which they identify key French expressions and then try to put their English equivalents into authentic English-language contexts. Thus, the opposition global / sectoriel, which students might hurriedly translate as 'global' and 'sectorial,' are important economic terms designating phenomena which touch all parts of the economy (global) or which affect only certain parts of a total economic system (sectoriel). Depending on context, then, global can mean 'universal,' 'industry-wide,' 'worldwide,' or 'total.' Sectoriel may be translated as 'partial,' 'linked to one industry,' or

'affecting one type of economic activity.' Armed with an understanding of the concepts which key words or phrases suggest, students will then translate the assigned passage on their own time.

Instructor efforts to create a translation universe must be most aggressive when students bring a somewhat limited commercial background to the translation of difficult or arcane commercial texts. This might be true, for example, of articles on the spot oil market, venture capital, the gross national product and stock trading, among others. The need for context here is so complete that preparation for passage translation requires a fourth technique, namely the discussion of assigned English-language readings on these subjects prior to translation activity. This procedure has several specific advantages:

1. Difficult or specialized English vocabulary can be identified and explained in reference to its context.
2. English-language phraseology indigenous to the topic in question can be highlighted and compared, as necessary, to more standard turns of phrases in English so that student comprehension is assured.
3. Attention can be called to pertinent high frequency English-language commercial expressions which are likely to be signaled by the French text.
4. The overall structure of related English texts can be analyzed with a view to identifying parameters or topic limitations of the subject area under scrutiny.

The following excerpt from a French newspaper article entitled "Lancement d'un emprunt d'Etat de douze milliards de francs" presents problems which are most readily solved by using this fourth technique of prior exposure to background materials in English:

L'Etat a lancé, mardi 26 juin, un emprunt de 12 milliards de francs dans le cadre de ses émissions classiques destinées à financer par de l'épargne une partie de son déficit budgétaire.

Cet emprunt comprend deux tranches:

La première est de 4 milliards de francs, à taux fixe et avec faculté de prorogation. La durée de départ est de huit ans. A la fin de la huitième année et de la douzième année, cette faculté permettra d'obtenir une prorogation de deux fois quatre ans. Les titres sont d'un million de francs, et le prix d'émission au pair. Le taux pour les huit premières années est de 12,80%, et, à chaque période de renouvellement, le taux sera celui des emprunts d'Etat à plus de sept ans.⁴

The word emprunt is a source of immediate ambiguity for student translators who are unfamiliar with the topic of government bonds. The dictionary defines emprunt as both a 'borrowing' and a 'loan,' and emprunt d'Etat means 'government loan.'⁵ Is the French government borrowing or lending money here? Under what precise conditions is it acting? To whom is

it lending or from whom is it borrowing money? Without a guiding concept, students will invariably mishandle other key words in the article. Cadre, lancer, émission classique, tranche, faculté, prorogation, durée de départ, and taux are all in the dictionary, but there is a high probability that students will choose an inappropriate meaning for each if the context remains illusive. Indeed, the language used to describe government bond issues in English is specialized and must be known beforehand by the translator. According to this language, lancer un emprunt means 'to float a loan,' dans le cadre de ses émissions classiques indicates that the French government will use its normal issuing procedures, tranche refers to a 'block' of bonds, faculté de prorogation says that the bonds are renewable (that bond life can be extended), la durée de départ is the 'bond life' (period required for the bond to mature). Student translators, drawing on their prior knowledge of the topic in question, will see the French article as a series of precise codes to be identified rather than as a litany of unrelated words to be translated.

Finally, it should be noted that techniques three and four are intended for use with a series of French passages or articles on the same topic. Only in that way can the instructor determine whether students are assimilating key concepts and whether translation proficiency within a given domain is increasing.

English-language materials are of course essential to the construction of a translation universe and instructors will find that such resources are readily available on their college campus. Periodic scrutiny of the Wall Street Journal and Business Week, for example, will permit them to build up a file of English-language articles to complement the French texts they like to assign. In addition, business school colleagues may be willing to serve as guest lecturers in the translation course and they may even be willing to make audio or video tapes of lectures on concepts which then could be discussed in class before translation activity begins.

Efforts to create a translation universe, however skillful, will not be effective unless they are matched with the proper types of foreign language materials. As a general guideline, instructors should choose those which do not lend themselves readily to analysis in the active-skills commercial classroom, that is, to analysis in the target language. A second criterion for selecting foreign language materials is authenticity. Generally speaking, texts chosen for translation should have been written by the French for the French. Only in this way can advanced students really feel that their translation skills will be most fully exercised. Edited passages and those for which a gloss has been provided do not challenge students sufficiently and may give them a false measure of their translation ability.

I have found that the best materials fall into two main categories. The first includes fixed-form documents such as

mandats, bordereaux and other formulaires which would require extensive explanation (probably in English) before students could profit from them in the traditionally-oriented commercial classroom. These documents contain built-in parameters and students can verify translation accuracy together in class by discussing what information must be supplied in the spaces provided. The information sought is often highly specific (names, addresses, amounts, dates) and does not lend itself to extensive use of the target language. The second category includes passages of a highly specialized or stylized nature. Articles from the business sections of French magazines and newspapers often assume prior acquaintance with the topic under consideration and must be related to a larger picture to be properly understood. Legal texts, such as import-export contracts, shipping instructions, deeds, public laws and articles on the legal aspects of commerce require familiarity with specific vocabularies in English before they can be translated accurately.

As was mentioned above with regard to materials in English, the search for authentic French-language commercial texts should begin in the campus library, and it will be limited only by the extent of the library's holdings and by the instructors' imagination and creativity. There are, however, other valuable resources which complement library holdings and which can be obtained free or at a reasonable cost.

Authentic formulaires are an immediate challenge because they are very difficult to obtain in the United States. Nicole Meunier and Gérard Coadou have edited an excellent work entitled Travaux professionnels sur documents commerciaux, which contains facsimiles of various fixed-form documents, including those used in banking, shipping, sales and payment of accounts.⁶ The "fine print" which often appears on the reverse side of these forms is frequently included as well. French banks and post offices are a goldmine for formulaires and informative leaflets which are available at no charge in the customer service area of these establishments. If a trip to France isn't feasible, a colleague, a student or a family member who is traveling there might be willing to gather these materials during a visit to the bank and the post office. No systematic attempt should be made to evaluate such documents while they are being gathered; it is better to judge their usefulness when they can be examined at leisure and related to course requirements and student needs.

Local industries with commercial interests in France and in Francophone countries can be another important source of specialized texts and correspondence suitable for translation. Instructors should call or visit their international department to make requests. Smaller local firms may occasionally need translation services and may allow translators to keep copies of non-sensitive documents they've been sent. Contact with a range of local firms will guarantee familiarity with various

specialized vocabularies and permit the development of a resource pool for class use.

Larger-scale efforts to generate a variety of translation materials will obviously involve contacting American firms with subsidiaries and affiliates in France as well as French firms doing business on American soil. The French Industrial Development Agency (FIDA), known in France as la Délégation à l'Aménagement du Territoire (DATAR) can identify the former through its offices in New York, Chicago or Los Angeles, and the French Embassy, through the services of its Commercial Counselor, can provide information on the latter.⁷ The World Trade Academy Press publishes two separate series of lists entitled Foreign Firms in the United States, and American Firms in Foreign Countries. Both works, updated yearly, are moderately priced and extremely comprehensive.⁸

A final word on source materials should include a reminder to be patient. It takes time to build up a backlog of resources; the passages and articles which prove most challenging and useful in the classroom will eventually form the core of course assignments. Once established through repeated use, this repertoire can be modified according to student needs and instructor preferences. Teachers will eventually become quite adept at selecting from a large body of printed material those passages which can be approached using the techniques described in this paper.

The purpose of this article has been to demonstrate that the commercial French to English translation offering is a proper sequel to the upper-level French business course taught in the framework of the traditional skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in the target language. The translation course described in this paper exposes students to a depth and variety which will greatly enhance their understanding of the nuances of French commerce by building on the foundation laid down in the more traditional business French course. Successful instruction in the "fifth skill" must include a concomitant development of the students' translation universe in their mother tongue so that they have a prior acquaintance with the concepts and English phraseology signalled by the French text. The French passage under consideration will then be seen as a series of interrelated symbols rather than as a collage of esoteric or ambiguous vocabulary words. Moreover, the holistic approach I am proposing offers the potential for a high degree of student and teacher satisfaction because attention is focused on specific topic areas until students achieve translation mastery. Student translators proceed at their own pace and their progress is measurable in qualitative terms within given subject areas. Finally, this approach is a realistic response to the variety and sophistication of translation activity done in the field of international business.

NOTES

¹Harrap's French and English Dictionary, eds. Françoise Larendeau, et al. (Harrap Limited, 1981), p. 84 (French-English section).

²Harrap's French and English Dictionary translates une grève perlée as a "go-slow" strike (84), but this obviously refers to a situation in which workers take longer than necessary to complete a manufacturing process by moving very slowly rather than by over-applying rules and regulations.

³This letter, which bears no copyright, was included in materials given to participants in Le Stage pédagogique du Français des Affaires sponsored by the Paris Chamber of Commerce and Industry and held in Paris July 2-13, 1984. The following is my translation of the text of the letter:

We are responding to your request for information on the foldable reply envelope "Pli-Post" and the "Folist" machine.

Please find enclosed a complete set of information on this equipment, as well as samples of the foldable reply envelope before printing [and] after cutting and shaping on the "Folist" machine.

This system permits processing of documents on all types of printers, and most especially on laser printers, because the glue is applied when the documents are shaped.

⁴"Lancement d'un emprunt d'Etat de douze milliards de francs," Le Monde, 27 juin, 1984, 35. The following is my translation of the portion of the article quoted in my paper:

On Tuesday, June 26, the [French] government floated a loan for 12 billion francs according to its normal issuing procedures. This bond issue is aimed at financing a part of its budget deficit by encouraging savings.

This government loan (= government bond issue) includes two blocks: The first is for 4 billion francs, at a fixed rate and with a renewal option. The bond life is eight years. At the end of the eighth year and of the twelfth year, this option will allow [investors] to obtain an extension of four years each time. The certificates are for a million francs, and the issuing price is at par. The rate for the first eight years is 12.80% and, at each renewal period, the rate will be that of government bonds [with a bond life] of more than seven years.

⁵Harrap's French and English Business Dictionary, p. 61 (French-English section).

⁶Nicole Meunier and Gérard Coadou, Travaux professionnels sur documents commerciaux (Paris: Les Editions Foucher, 1978).

⁷The French Industrial Development Agency can be reached at the following addresses in the United States: 610 Fifth Avenue, Suite 610, New York, NY 10020, (212) 757-9340; 401 North Michigan Avenue,

Suite 4035, Chicago, IL 60611, (312) 661-1640; 1801 Avenue of the Stars, Suite 410, Los Angeles, CA 90067, (213) 879-0352. The Commercial Counselor can be reached by contacting the French Embassy in New York at the address listed above.

⁸The World Trade Academy Press is located at the following address: Suite 509, 50 East 42nd Street, New York, NY 10017, (212) 697-4999. Instructors should ask for the list concerning France in each series.

Works Cited

American Firms in Foreign Countries. 10th ed. New York: World Trade Academy Press, Inc., 1986.

Foreign Firms in the United States. 5th ed. New York: World Trade Academy Press, Inc., 1986.

Harrap's French and English Business Dictionary. Eds. Françoise Laurendeau, et al. London: Harrap Limited, 1981.

"Lancement d'un emprunt d'Etat de douze milliards de francs."
Le Monde, 27 juin, 1984, 35.

Meunier, Nicole and Gérard Coadou. Travaux professionnels sur documents commerciaux. Paris: Les Editions Foucher, 1978.